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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000476

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: FORMER IMPRISONED OPPOSITION LEADERS BACK
MILINKEVICH

REF: A. 05 MINSK 601
[1](#)B. MINSK 440
[1](#)C. MINSK 217
[1](#)D. MINSK 453

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On June 4, Ambassador met with two recently-released political prisoners. Opposition youth leader Pavel Severinets and Belarusian Social Democratic Party chair Nikolay Statkevich expressed their gratitude to the USG for pressuring the GOB to free them. They also noted their dissatisfaction with the recent democratic congress and pledged their strong support for former opposition leader Aleksander Milinkevich. End summary.

Severinets and Statkevich Credit U.S. for Early Release...

[1](#)2. (C) On June 4, Ambassador met with opposition youth organization Malady Front founder Pavel Severinets and opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Gramada" (BSDP-NG) Chair Nikolay Statkevich, both of whom authorities released on May 22 after two years of internal exile for leading unauthorized demonstrations against Belarus' official 2004 parliamentary election results (ref A). Severinets and Statkevich thanked the United States for pressuring the GOB to release them two months earlier than planned (ref B). Statkevich added that the regime could easily have extended their incarcerations under false pretenses. He thanked Ambassador for recently meeting with him in detention and attributed a significant improvement in his treatment by correctional authorities to the visit (ref C). Recollecting how authorities had prevented Ambassador from visiting him, Severinets also thanked the Embassy for its unswerving moral support for him and other political prisoners.

Criticize the Congress and Opposition Parties...

[1](#)3. (C) Severinets and Statkevich lamented to Ambassador that their lengthy absences from politics had severely hampered their organizations' presence and influence at the democratic opposition's congress (ref D), which several political party "bureaucrats" had skillfully dominated, especially Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Chair Sergey Kalyakin. When asked about the congress' vote not to consider their more radical "street action" strategy, both opposition leaders insisted that the congress had underrepresented non-party opposition activists and that the strategy adopted at the congress did

not reflect the will of the broad opposition's majority. Furthermore, they asserted that the congress had revealed growing divisions between the coalition's "pro-European majority" and Kalyakin, whom they consider beholden to Russian financial support and influence. In contrast with BPC, Statkevich said that his supporters had remained loyal to BSDP-NG because it is the only left-wing party with a pro-European orientation.

And Pledge Their Support for Milinkevich

¶4. (C) Despite his deep disappointment with former opposition presidential candidate Aleksander Milinkevich's failure to rally pro-democracy activists on October Square on March 19, 2006 and other leadership faults, Statkevich still recognized the former presidential candidate as the closest among top coalition leaders to BSDP-NG goals and the best choice for leader of Belarus' democratic opposition. Severinets was considerably more categorical in his support for Milinkevich and his "For Freedom" movement. According to Severinets, Milinkevich fully backs Severinets' plan to further mobilize and incorporate Belarus' Christian community into the struggle for democratic reform.

¶5. (C) Severinets and Statkevich strongly endorsed what they regarded as Milinkevich's recent change of strategy -- that is, casting membership in the "For Freedom" movement as an alternative, not merely a supplement, to membership in the larger opposition parties. Comparing "For Freedom" to Poland's "Solidarity" movement in the 1980s, they predicted that Milinkevich would overcome what they regarded as his past shortcomings of leadership if he surrounded himself with

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capable and "sincere" advisors.

Comment

¶6. (C) Severinets and Statkevich -- a nationalistic Christian democratic youth leader and a pan-European social democratic party boss -- may appear as a political odd couple. To some extent, their support of Milinkevich is likely a reflection of political realities -- Malady Front's relatively marginalized presence at the congress and Statkevich's inability to directly challenge Kalyakin's hold over the opposition's left-wing parties. However, without a doubt, their political partnership is also a reflection of their deep personal friendship forged through their shared experiences of leading pro-democracy demonstrations and enduring political persecution.

Stewart